

# **Starting Down the Road to Power: The Denver Area Labor Federation**

By Stephanie Luce and Mark Nelson

Denver is a medium sized city located in a conservative state, where Republicans control the governorship and both houses of the legislature. Because it is somewhat geographically isolated – there are no other labor councils large enough to support staff for hundreds of miles in any direction – it has not always received the level of attention given to other labor councils. Yet within the past decade the Denver Area Labor Federation (DALF) has undergone striking changes. In this article we provide some background on DALF and the broader Denver area labor movement, review the work of DALF, and analyze the efforts to build power at the local level. In particular, we will assess DALF according to six criteria: coalition building, preparing for governance, shifting the public debate, leadership development, real victories and new organizing. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of some of the challenges DALF has faced in meeting their goals, and the lessons we can draw from DALF’s experience.

For this report, we conducted in-person and telephone interviews with 18 people from the Denver area. This included members of the Denver Area Labor Federation leadership, community organization representatives, national and state AFL-CIO staff, union staff members, and a local journalist. These interviews were conducted in December 2003 through March 2004. Material gathered through interviews is attributed to the respondent except in a few cases where sources wished to remain anonymous. In addition to interviews, we collected information on Denver and DALF from an extensive Lexis-Nexis search of articles from the past decade.

## **The Political Context**

### *Denver*

Denver is in many ways unlike other urban centers. The city itself has just over a half million residents, while the metro area has over two million (the metro area population increased by 30% in the 1990s). While the downtown never saw the extreme deterioration found in many other cities, recent population trends have resulted in more affluent whites moving into the city, resulting in the gentrification of certain neighborhoods. Meanwhile, some of the city's Latino population has moved to the suburbs.<sup>1</sup>

Denver has a consolidated government for the city and county, and is run by a Mayor and City Council, with a “powerful mayor” structure. The Council has 11 districted seats and two at-large seats. The city has been governed by Democratic administrations for the last several decades. In 1983, Federico Pena was elected as the first Latino mayor. He had an ambitious agenda, including bringing a new airport, convention center and major league baseball team to the city. After easily winning a second term, he chose not to run again in 1991.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Wellington Webb won the mayor's seat, becoming the city's first African-American mayor. Webb was a prominent member of the Democratic Party, and his administration is referred to by many as “old-style, Democratic Party machine politics.” Webb was very popular, easily winning a second and third term in office. He may have won a fourth term, were it not for the term limits that prevented him from running again.

John Hickenlooper is the current mayor of Denver. Hickenlooper was elected in 2003 and is a Democrat, but he ran as a political outsider. Hickenlooper, a former geologist, made a personal fortune through investments in Denver area restaurants. Many refer to him as a fiscal

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<sup>1</sup> However the overall Latino population (identified as Hispanic of any race) in the city grew from 23% in 1990 to 32% in 2000. The black population went from 13% in 1990 to 11% in 2000.

conservative, socially liberal, Democratic Leadership Council-style mayor. Although all three of these mayors have been relatively friendly to labor in terms of their rhetoric, most observers agree that labor has never had a solid foothold in city politics. As one interviewee put it, “labor has not been in the smoke filled rooms.”

### *Colorado State Politics*

It is important to situate Denver politics within the framework of the state of Colorado. Denver is the largest city in the state, and is the geographic home to the state capital. For this reason, Denver politics are important to the state. At the same time, the dominant political viewpoint of Denver residents is not mirrored by the rest of the state. While just under 50 percent of Denver voters are registered Democrats (24 percent are Republicans and 28 percent are unaffiliated), Republicans outnumber Democrats at the state level. Statewide, only 30 percent of voters are Democrats, while 35% are registered Republicans, and 34% are not affiliated with any party.<sup>3</sup>

Colorado is what some call a modified right-to-work state: representation elections are won with the standard 50% plus 1 votes, but a union must prevail in a second election with 75% of the vote in order to bargain a union security clause. Right to work legislation has been proposed in nearly every legislative session for decades, with a democratic governor preventing its passage through 1998, when this seat was lost by .5% of the vote. The Democrats won a majority of the state legislature in 2000, which helped prevent a complete conversion to Right to Work. In 2002, the state lost its Democratic majority, but according to DALF president Leslie

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<sup>2</sup> Pena was appointed Secretary of Transportation by Bill Clinton in 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Greene, 1999. “Economy, voters deserve credit for city's renewal Bond issues.” *The Denver Post*. November 26. Pg. B-01.

Moody, labor “still had five Republican swing votes for labor friendly positions.” Two of those 5 seats will be lost in 2004 due to term limits. Moody states, “The battle is really ideological now – the Republicans in the state are totally anti-union.”

### **The Denver Labor Movement and DALF Leadership**

It is difficult to get firm numbers on union density, but most people agree that the Denver area labor movement has seen hard times in recent years due to plant closings, downsizing and layoffs. According to DALF, there are just over 50,000 union members in DALF affiliates in 2003. The largest union in the state, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) has 20,000 members statewide, and 12,544 in the Denver area. Other large affiliates include the Communication Workers of America (CWA), with almost 5,000 members; Service Employees International Union (SEIU) with approximately 3,500; and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), International Association of Machinists (IAM), American Postal Workers Union (APWU), and American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) with 2,000 to 3,000 each. The ten largest affiliates account for 71% of DALF’s total membership.

The current president of the Denver Area Labor Federation is Leslie Moody. In 1998 a group of reform minded union leaders, many of whom had been involved in building Jobs with Justice (JwJ) in Colorado, decided to support Moody and a reform slate for leadership positions at DALF. This group felt that the incumbent Labor Council leadership was relatively ineffective. Moody noted that the group of labor leaders involved in Jobs with Justice “looked at the situation and realized they were all paying \$100 per month to keep JwJ staffed, but \$150-\$1,000 per month to the Central Labor Council (CLC) and getting nothing in return. They decided they wanted more out of the CLC, and tried to find someone else to become president.” According to

Mitch Ackerman, at that time organizing director of SEIU Local 105, “DALF was moribund at the time.”

Moody came to Denver from San Francisco where she worked on development and grant-writing for grass roots community organizations, including the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO). In Denver, Leslie was involved in leadership and fund development for CTWO’s local organizing project. Two years after moving to Denver, she was hired as the first paid staff person at Colorado Jobs with Justice. They had received her resume from Larry Cohen of CWA.<sup>4</sup>

Leaders Mary Blue (CWA), Bruce Meachum of The Newspaper Guild (TNG), and Mike Garcia (SEIU) had founded JwJ in Colorado in 1987. Many additional organizations contributed to JwJ activism in the early 90’s, most notably the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) and the National Lawyers Guild. While Blue and Meachum were still in Colorado in 1998, they had moved on from local union leadership to other positions. The new leaders of these locals, particularly then JwJ co-chairs Mike Wilzoch (SEIU) and Jana Smith-Carr (CWA), spurred the change in labor council leadership. They were joined by Tony Mulligan at the TNG, Ernie Duran at UFCW, and Bob Mason at International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) 111.

Leslie made the contacts with the leadership of the labor movement in Denver which eventually lead to her being elected president of DALF through her position with JwJ. She had cultivated union support by revitalizing the JwJ chapter in the mid-1990s. JwJ had played a large role in the Justice for Janitors campaign, and it ran almost all solidarity support in the region, hosting Union Summer for two years, building support for the United Farm Worker (UFW) Strawberry Campaign, and raising funds and awareness around the Detroit Newspaper Strike, the

Staley strike, and others. According to a 1996 Knight-Ridder article, Jobs with Justice was “revitalizing unions in Colorado.”<sup>5</sup> The activity in Jobs with Justice helped build a group of supporters who were ready to make DALF a more activist organization. This, of course, was not easy. There was resistance from several places, including the Building Trades Council, who saw a more activist DALF as perhaps infringing on their turf. In addition, a number of labor leaders were not ready to convert their servicing model to an organizing one.

Currently, the only paid leadership position in DALF is the president. There are three other paid positions: a part-time office manager/bookkeeper, a political director, and an organizing director that splits his time with the Front Range Economic Strategy Center (FRESC), the DALF initiated 501(c)(3) research, policy, and organizing center.<sup>6</sup> Entering office in 1998 along with Moody was Tim Marquez (CWA) as Vice President, and Derene Armelin (UFCW) as Recording Secretary. The executive board is comprised of 27 members, but not all seats are always filled. Currently, there are 21 members on the e-board, including 4 from public sector unions, 11 from industrial, and 6 from the building trades. There are 5 people of color on the board (plus one in elected leadership). There are 6 women on the executive board.

### **DALF’s Work**

Most sources agree that the DALF has been very active in recent years, engaging in electoral mobilization, labor-community work, labor organizing and strike support work, and creating FRESC, a new policy/research organization. The following provides more detail on those projects, presented in chronological order.

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<sup>4</sup> Phone interview with Kevin Mulligan.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Duran, 1996. “New unionism gives workers hope.” Knight Ridder/Tribune. October 31.

## Political Action

### *Living Wage*

In 1996, Denver labor and community activists supported a ballot initiative to set a local minimum wage. That campaign was defeated, but DALF and ACORN led an effort to revive a city council ordinance-based living wage campaign in 1998. In February of 2000, after two years of organizing, the Denver City Council voted 12-1 in favor of a living-wage ordinance.

According to the AFL-CIO's weekly newsletter "Work in Progress," the ordinance required companies with Denver city contracts in excess of \$2,000 to pay employees enough to keep a family of four above the poverty line. Initially that amount was \$8.20 an hour and the ordinance called for an annual adjustment to wages to keep up with the cost of living. Joining the struggle for the living-wage ordinance were Jobs with Justice, Communications Workers of America 7777, SEIU 105, 9to5, the National Association for Working Women and several area clergy.<sup>7</sup>

### *Electoral Work at the State Level*

Starting in 1998, DALF changed its electoral strategy in a number of ways. For example, for the Governor's race in 1998, DALF asked its affiliates to participate in a "lost-time-program" wherein participating affiliates would pay staff to work on election campaigns under the direction and leadership of the DALF. This program put DALF at the center of the campaigns with staff and rank-and-file activists taking direction from and reporting to the labor movement rather than the political candidate in each campaign.

The DALF supported candidate for Governor lost by the slimmest of margins in 1998. But DALF's ability to engage in the electoral arena was enhanced as staff, union activists, and

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<sup>6</sup> FRESC will be discussed in detail below.

<sup>7</sup> Work in Progress, [www.afl-cio.org](http://www.afl-cio.org)

volunteers from a variety of different unions learned to work together and move this new style of work forward. Because DALF was no longer content with nor financially able to simply give money to candidates claiming to be “pro-labor,” they put together a candidate briefing program, asking candidates seeking labor’s endorsement to sit through an educational session on matters of interest and concern to labor such as organizing, apprenticeships, and local development projects. DALF began to make it clear to candidates that their contribution to electoral politics was going to be an activist, rubber meets the road, door-to-door kind of contribution. Rather than money, for example, candidates could expect union members to walk voter districts with campaign literature or staff phone banks during the push to get out the vote.<sup>8</sup>

In November 2000, the State AFL-CIO and DALF were able to make the winning difference in seven of ten contested state senate seats enabling labor to claim it had retaken the state legislature in what the AFL-CIO called the “Colorado Miracle.” DALF played a key role in the election. Six of the seven targeted seats, all in district where republican and independent voters out-numbered democrats, were in metro Denver. DALF ran a major voter registration, education and GOTV program targeting union households. More than 7000 voters were registered, and exit polling revealed that 80% of union Republicans swung their vote on the state senate candidate. This change in the balance of power in the legislature prevented that body from passing a “Right-to-Work” bill lending a degree of credibility to labor’s claim. Adding further credence to the claim was the fact that the 2000 elections broke 24 years of Republican hegemony in the Colorado senate.

The 2000 success did not carry into the 2002 mid-term elections. From a report in *The Denver Post* it appears the Democratic Party, its base, and its activist organizations were in a

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<sup>8</sup> Phone interviews with Leslie Moody and Kevin Mulligan, and <http://www.ua.org/bobyoungh.htm>.



state of confusion and disarray, resulting in major defeat and loss of the majority in the state legislature.<sup>9</sup> According to the Colorado based research and consulting group Ciruli Associates:

The 2002 mid-term elections were very good to Colorado Republicans. They held Wayne Allard's vulnerable U.S. Senate seat, won a new congressional district, re-elected Bill Owens, a popular governor with national aspirations, and won back control of the State Senate—re-establishing 24 years of legislative hegemony that had been briefly broken in the 2000 election.<sup>10</sup>

Those interviewees questioned about Labor 2002 indicated that Colorado unions had a difficult time agreeing on candidates and coordinating resources for campaigns. One interviewee stated flatly his belief that, “In 2002 they [the State Fed and DALF] got out-organized.” In his view, the Right mobilized its electorate and organized successfully in response to Colorado labor's enlivened and dominant showing in 2000. According to Leslie Moody, DALF's capacity to create progressive policy change at the state level is at least four years away.

### *Electoral Work at the Municipal Level*

After many years of small successes at city council, school board, and fire district elections throughout DALF's five county area, DALF saw a tremendous opportunity in the 2003 Denver City and County elections. In early 2003 DALF held a strategic planning session with community allies, which allowed them to lay out a plan for the next several months, building to the May primaries and June election. DALF had already made an early endorsement of Don Mares for mayor in 2002. DALF also endorsed 9 candidates for City Council races. The two main candidates for the mayoral seat – Mares and Hickenlooper – were both Democrats (the race is officially non-partisan).

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<sup>9</sup> We could find no press on the DALF's or the Colorado AFL-CIO's role in the 2002 Democratic Party loss in Colorado. In general, our interviewees also had little comment on the 2002 elections.

<sup>10</sup> Ciruli Associates at <http://www.ciruli.com/archives/CO-election02.htm>.

The Building Trades were strong Mares supporters because the office he held under Webb was responsible for enforcing the city and county prevailing wage ordinance. This ordinance also included the requirement of fixed apprenticeship to journeyman ratios on public works projects. Mares' office was also responsible for building code enforcement on city and county public works projects. Along with plumbers and electricians who must be licensed by the state, pipe fitters and sheet metal workers who work on heating and cooling systems must be licensed to work in Denver. Don Mares' office aggressively enforced these building regulations, apprenticeship ratios and licensing requirements over the years. Mares even was willing to take on the mayor in some cases in order to get these laws enforced.<sup>11</sup> Others in the labor movement supported Mares as well, stating that he was a long-time friend of labor.

The Mares mayoral campaign hit a few stumbling blocks along the way, and his rival Hickenlooper ran a strong campaign. Mares was also unable to secure the endorsement of outgoing Mayor Wellington Webb, who chose not to endorse anyone in the race. Many believe that Webb appointees worked with the press early in the campaign to undo Mares' credibility by highlighting budget issues and personal conflicts with the mayor. The press was beginning to paint the Mares campaign as in trouble. By mid-May Hickenlooper led in the polls. Hickenlooper picked up the formal endorsement of the police, sheriff's, and firefighters unions. In the end, Hickenlooper won in a landslide. Throughout the campaign DALF coordinated the work of rank-and-file members and "lost-time-staff" who knocked on doors, did literature drops, staffed phone banks and worked to get out the vote. And, while in the end Mares did not win on June 5, five of six DALF supported city council candidates did.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews with Eddie Canales and Neil Hall.

<sup>12</sup> According to Mitch Ackerman, Leslie Moody, and Carmen Rhodes, because of the way DALF targets districts and ranks candidates labor can claim to have won 11 of the 13 council seats in June 2003. There is some

### *Denver School Board*

With lessons learned from the 1998 Governor's race, DALF, along with its participating affiliates, made a significant contribution to the organizing campaign among service workers at Denver Public Schools conducted by Communications Workers of America local 7777. Standing in the way of a successful organizing campaign and the desire of the workers to achieve union representation was the seven-member school board. In order to overcome this obstacle DALF partnered with Jobs with Justice, the Ministerial Alliance, and other faith-based and community groups to hold a workers rights board hearing on the issue. In November 1999, DALF and its allies, particularly the National Education Association (NEA) affiliated Denver Classroom Teachers' Association, embarked on an intensive "labor-neighbor" education and GOTV program. They were able to elect two new school board members willing to convince other board members that granting organizing rights to the service workers was the right thing to do. In spring of 2000, 125 part-time custodians were granted the right to join CWA.<sup>13</sup>

### Economic Development Work

#### *The Colorado Convention Center Hotel<sup>14</sup>*

In the late 1990s the city of Denver entertained a proposal, put forward by Denver developer Bruce Berger, to build a Colorado Convention Center in downtown Denver. The developer requested the Denver Urban Renewal Authority and City Council approve a \$55 million tax increment financing (TIF) agreement to assist in the building of the Convention

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disagreement among union leaders about the role of DALF versus the affiliates in this election. In particular, Ernie Duran of UFCW states that his members did the lion's share of the work on the campaigns.

<sup>13</sup> Moody and Mulligan interviews.

Center.<sup>15</sup> The hotel was an entirely private development venture. According to *The Denver Post*, the TIF would “defray a portion of the expense of the 1,100-room, \$217 million hotel.”<sup>16</sup> Even though four City Council members opposed the deal, in the end, the Council approved the TIF agreement.<sup>17</sup>

The first overt labor challenge to the hotel and its TIF came from DALF and the Hotel Employee and Restaurant Employees union (HERE), which threatened to petition Denver voters to bring the TIF to a referendum. This move would have effectively killed the hotel at the Convention Center according to the *Denver Business Journal*.<sup>18</sup> Eventually Denver District Judge Warren Martin ruled TIF decisions could not legally be referred to the voters and that ended the HERE challenge. Despite this decision, HERE negotiated a comprehensive labor peace agreement (card check and neutrality) on future hotel worker organizing.<sup>19</sup>

The next labor challenge to the hotel project came from the Building Trades Council (BTC). At issue was mounted the city’s plan to set up a quasi-public entity to run the hotel construction. By challenging this plan the BTC hoped to win satisfactory apprentice-to-journeyman ratios, union affiliated inspectors, and a project labor agreement on hotel construction. When negotiations between the BTC, the mayor, and the city council broke down the BTC threatened a petition drive to put the quasi-public construction authority to a public

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<sup>14</sup> Given the level of conflict and sense of betrayal felt by members of DALF, the BTC, and the Carpenters concerning a policy agenda and strategy for the Convention Center Hotel, the participants do not have a shared narrative of these events. Hence our research reflects a contested story.

<sup>15</sup> John Rebchook, 2000. “Developers Agree On Hotel Plans \$217 Million Project Will Enable Expansion Of Convention Center.” *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. May 11.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Leib and J. Sebastian Sinisi, 2001. “Split Council Approves Hotel Plan, Subsidy.” *The Denver Post*, January 9.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Flynn, 2000. “4 On Council Oppose Hotel Subsidy.” *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. June 2.

<sup>18</sup> Erin Johansen, 2003. “Unions Making Their Presence Felt.” *Denver Business Journal*. June 20. The article claims the threat of a public vote on the project would have scared of bond insurers. It is exactly on this point that the BTC felt betrayed by HERE and DALF. The BTC saw the DALF/HERE strategy as jeopardizing their work and an intrusion on their traditional and jurisdictional turf. According to Moody “The trades council sold-out HERE publicly for a back-room deal with the mayor on construction.”

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Eddie Canales.

vote.<sup>20</sup> They withdrew this threat after reaching an agreement with the mayor creating a debarment ordinance and on-site inspector at the Convention Center.<sup>21</sup>

Soon after, the Western Mountain Regional Council of Carpenters (WMRCC) circulated petitions in an effort to force negotiations on a Project Labor Agreement (PLA), frustrating other parties interested in seeing the hotel project move forward even under conditions less than wholly favorable to labor. According to the Carpenter’s analysis, the Building Trades “caved in” during the PLA negotiations with the mayor and the city council. Mayor Webb, whom the Carpenters and the Building Trades had supported for twelve years, engineered the creation of the quasi-public entity and then had the hotel project transferred to this entity in order to remove the project from the scope of Denver’s prevailing wage and apprentice-ratio requirements. It also appeared at the time that a virulently anti-union general contractor was about to win the bid for the hotel construction. In other words, according to Eddie Canales of the WMRCC, the Carpenters concluded they had nothing to lose.<sup>22</sup>

In the wake of the resistance met on the hotel project, the Carpenters began to craft an city ordinance requiring the city council to include “responsible contractor,” “best practices,” or “best value” contracting language on Denver construction contracts. DALF and FRESC had been crafting a similar ordinance and a multi-union campaign to cover all city contracts, subsidy projects, properties and special districts – for both service and construction dollars. DALF

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<sup>20</sup> At this point HERE/DALF saw the BTC strategy as placing the construction of a union hotel in jeopardy. On the other hand, BTC did not regard the neutrality agreement won by HERE in the same light. According to Neil Hall it still remained to be seen whether or not HERE would organize the hotel in the future and the BTC still had a responsibility go after the hotel work for its members.

<sup>21</sup> The BTC negotiated the “Debarment Ordinance” with the City when it became clear they would not get a PLA on the hotel. According to Neil Hall, Secretary-Treasurer of the BTC, “The Debarment Ordinance is a “three strikes and you’re out” ordinance debaring any contractor working on public works who violates apprenticeship ratios and or licensing requirements from bidding for three years. At the same time the BTC also negotiated with the city to hire an inspector who would work through the city auditor’s office to check on licenses and apprentice ratios at the Convention Center Hotel. The auditor’s office—run by Don Mares—hired a retired United Association Local 208 long time member and Business Agent for the job.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Eddie Canales.

initiated negotiation with the Carpenters and the BTC, and they agreed to fold their efforts into one campaign. Negotiations with the mayor and city council concerning the future of the joint ordinance began in April 2004.

*Front Range Economic Strategy Center (FRESC)*

Partly through her work in the AFL-CIO Central Labor Council leadership Advisory Committee, Leslie Moody saw how labor councils in other regions had had success with building non-profit policy and research organizations to support their work. In 2001, looking especially to models in California (such as Working Partnerships, LAANE, CPI and EBASE), Leslie Moody and DALF political director Carmen Rhodes began to lay the groundwork to create a similar organization in Denver. According to Moody, the impetus for FRESC was the turnover in elected officials that would face the city in 2003. “We wanted the progressive movement positioned to frame a new vision for the city,” said Moody. These changes presented an historic opportunity to push the city in a progressive direction, “but nobody was organizing to make that happen.”

The Front-Range Economic Strategy Center (FRESC) was launched in the beginning of 2002, with Chris Nevitt as the first staff person. According to DALF, FRESC was intended as a “coalition-building, research, and policy-development enterprise to build and sustain a long-term strategic partnership between area unions and the region’s policy, community, and accountable development organizations.”

The organization was launched with \$20,000 in seed money that DALF had saved for the purpose, along with donations from two national unions, SEIU and the Laborers. This provided Nevitt with a starting salary and budget, from which he went to work writing grants. Office space

and resources were provided by DALF. FRESC was established as a 501(c)3 organization, with a board of community and labor leaders chaired by Leslie Moody.<sup>23</sup> According to the DALF web page, the goal of FRESC is to “enable Metro Area working families to marshal the power and expertise necessary to hold local governments accountable for the creation of quality family-supporting jobs, affordable housing, and secure health care.”

In its earliest days, FRESC concentrated on bringing in new grants to sustain and grow the organization. By 2004, the FRESC budget has grown to slightly less than \$450,000 and the organization now has six staff members. The main project of the organization has been the establishment of the Campaign for Responsible Development. This is a labor-community coalition set-up to do work around local economic development projects. The first major campaign focused on the large scale Gates Rubber Factory Redevelopment.

### *Gates Rubber Factory Redevelopment*

The Gates Rubber Factory was a landmark in Denver for over 85 years. Founded in 1911, the company grew into a multinational giant in the world of automotive-related parts such as belts and hoses. However, Gates slowly began moving production overseas and abandoning its facilities in Denver. In December 2001, Cherokee Denver LLC purchased the 50-acre site of the Gates Rubber Factory situated on Broadway near the light rail line and I-25.<sup>24</sup>

According to *Denver Post* reporter Mark Couch, Cherokee Investments, the parent of which Cherokee Denver is a subsidiary, announced plans to tear down most of the abandoned Gates Factory and build “\$750 million village of offices, stores and apartments” on the site south

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<sup>23</sup> [<http://www.denverlabor.org/>], February 8, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Cherokee Denver website: [www.cherokeedenver.com/project/index.htm](http://www.cherokeedenver.com/project/index.htm), February 1, 2004.

of downtown converting the area into a transit hub.<sup>25</sup> At the time, Couch reported city officials said the site Cherokee planned to develop was “one of the most important links to the light rail network connecting southeast and southwest metro Denver to downtown.” Demonstrating the centrality of this development project, Cherokee executives held roughly 50 meetings with environmental officials, Denver land planners, officials from the Regional Transportation District, and residents of the neighborhoods in proximity to the site before unveiling the project to the general public. Cherokee needed zoning approval for the project, but it also wanted \$150 million in tax breaks from the city, in the form of Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) and other subsidies.

DALF and FRESC began a campaign to mobilize around the Gates development in 2003. The plan was to establish a coalition of labor and community groups that would fight for a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) that would accompany the development. The CBA would contain a range of provisions, such as a Project Labor Agreement (PLA), affordable housing,<sup>26</sup> living wage jobs with benefits, neighborhood parks and beautification,<sup>27</sup> and an on-site child-care center for up over 100 children. Chris Nevitt of FRESC remarked, “Public investments in private projects should yield solid and verifiable public returns.”<sup>28</sup> To win the Agreement, FRESC helped establish a coalition called the Campaign for Responsible Development (CRD).

In May 2003 the Denver Planning Board held a meeting to determine whether to approve the creation of a special “urban renewal district” at the site of the old Gates Rubber Factory.<sup>29</sup> According to Eddie Canales, organizing director for the Mountain West Region Council of

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<sup>25</sup> Mark P. Couch, 2002. “Developer Plans to Raze Old Gates Plant.” *The Denver Post*. June 27.

<sup>26</sup> Specifically, setting aside 20% of the housing for people making 50% of the median income in Denver.

<sup>27</sup> Upgrading neighborhood alleys and street lighting.

<sup>28</sup> Mark P. Couch, 2003. “Invest in Area, Group Urges Gates Redevelopers.” *The Denver Post*. April 18.



Carpenters and long time Denver unionist, urban redevelopment plans and tax increment financing money had historically been rubber stamped by the Denver City Council.<sup>30</sup> In its continuing effort to shift the Denver and Colorado power regime toward more human centered policy outcomes, members of the growing CRD, including FRESC staff, raised objections to the Gates redevelopment plan at the May meeting due to its lack of a clearly expressed commitment to “affordable housing, high paying jobs and investments in neighborhoods and parks.”<sup>31</sup> Chris Nevitt said after the meeting, “The return to the public remains insufficiently defined.”<sup>32</sup> At the end of the meeting, the Planning Board criticized the city’s economic development officials for their slowness in sharing information on the redevelopment project with the public. Nevertheless, the Board sent the Gates plan to City Council with its approval.

Having introduced its demands to the public at the City Planning Board the campaign focused on getting the city council to deny the urban renewal district-zoning requests if the redevelopment plan failed to include a Community Benefits Agreement. In response, Tracy Huggins, executive director of the Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) argued that it would not be fair to Cherokee Denver to ask them to meet the CRD demands. “That puts this developer at a disadvantage,” said Huggins. “The group’s list of demands adds costs that are impossible to calculate at this point.”<sup>33</sup> Needless to say, the DURA recommended that the City Council approve the redevelopment project and TIF funding for it, knowing that the environmental cleanup costs “have yet to be determined.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The plan was submitted to the Denver Planning Board by the Denver Urban Renewal Authority and would declare the property blighted.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Eddie Canales.

<sup>31</sup> Mark P. Couch, 2003. “Urban Renewal Status for Gates Site Backed.” *The Denver Post*, May 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Steve Moyski, president of Cherokee Denver LLC, was on record as willing to negotiate with the CRD but not over the whole package of demands and not until it was clear how much TIF money the city was going to make available. Moyski wanted the city to agree to reimburse Cherokee for development work currently underway, even though the City Council hadn't approved the DURA zoning recommendation. Moyski commented of the CRD, "They want 50 acres of labor utopia."<sup>35</sup>

City Councilwoman Kathleen MacKenzie led in bringing the Gates redevelopment project together in its earliest stages, as the development is located in her district. At the June 16, 2003 City Council meeting, the Council approved the special urban renewal district zoning for Gates by a vote of 11 to 1, opening the way for Cherokee Denver to return to the City Council at a future date to secure taxpayer funding for the project. Sixty members of the CRD attended the Council meeting and demonstrated for their demands on the steps of City Hall.<sup>36</sup> Although she had been supported by labor, relations between MacKenzie and DALF have become strained over the Gates project.

As part of the CRD campaign for a Community Benefits Agreement and at the impetus of UFCW, FRESC initiated work to negotiate an agreement to prevent any big box stores from being built on the Gates property.<sup>37</sup> "When you come to a negotiation," said Neal Hall, "you have to lay what you've got on the table."<sup>38</sup> According to Hall, at a CRD steering committee meeting in April, UFCW asked Cherokee Denver that no commercial building go into Gates with

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Mark P. Couch, 2003. "City Oks Break for Gates Site But Developer Must Submit Details Before Getting Cash." *The Denver Post*. June 17.

<sup>37</sup> This is the way Ernie Duran and Neal Hall tell the story. Leslie asserts, "FRESC actually researched the language and precedence and approached UFCW with this, since they had not had a successful "stop Wal-Mart" strategy on past projects."

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Neal Hall.

more than 80,000 sq. ft. of floor space. Moyski, the Cherokee's representative at the meeting, agreed to this restriction.

Since the June 2003 City Council meeting, the CRD moved forward with planning for how to negotiate a community benefits agreement directly with the developer. The CRD planned a meeting for January 29, 2004 to invite the developer, Steve Moyski in order to show him the breadth of the Campaign. Moyski initially agreed to attend but backed out when he heard that media sources might be there. The CRD went ahead with the meeting drawing about 300 people. A few days later Moyski resigned his position with Cherokee Denver. As of March 2004, no one had been appointed to replace Moyski.

As in other cities, the focus of the community benefits agreement campaigns and the priorities of the building trades, while not necessarily conflicting, are not identical. Neal Hall and Eddie Canales both agree that a PLA is the central concern of the Building Trades Council in any negotiated Community Benefits Agreement with Cherokee. According to Moody, "while a PLA is on the table, the fact that [the BTC] generally receives none of this work has them a little more realistic about what a first step would be. Initially they just wanted open bidding, and that has been significantly beefed up to include prevailing wage and responsible/best value language at the minimum."<sup>39</sup> DALF and other members of the CRD are focused on winning a Community Benefits Agreement with living wages, child-care, and affordable housing.

### **Pulling Together Power Elements**

Clearly, DALF and its allies have had a full schedule of work over the past years. According to Chris Nevitt, the organizations are to some degree overextended, because of the large amount of work to be done. But how would one evaluate that work? What are the successes

and what are the challenges? In order to evaluate the impact of the work described above, we rely on six measures of power building outlined in David Reynolds' introduction.

We should note at the outset that DALF's work is on-going, which means that it may be too early to accurately assess outcomes. In addition, there are many actors in the Denver area labor movement, and almost as many opinions on the state of the labor movement. We have attempted to triangulate sources in order to develop the most accurate picture of the work. However, getting the 'real story' is not always possible as the evaluation may be subjective. Given these caveats, we now turn to an examination of DALF's power building.

### *Coalition Building*

DALF's current president, Leslie Moody, came to DALF directly from her position at Jobs with Justice. Indeed, some of the main individuals and unions active in reviving Jobs with Justice proved instrumental in getting Leslie elected. This would suggest a natural connection between DALF and Jobs with Justice under Leslie's leadership. The two groups have appeared to work together closely on some issues, such as the 2000 campaign to pass a city living wage ordinance. However, several observers noted a growing tension between DALF and Jobs with Justice over the years. Some say that when Leslie and her supporters came to DALF, they believed that DALF could now take on some of the work that Jobs with Justice had done. Furthermore, when FRESC was established, it soon appeared to go beyond its initial visions of research and policy work to move into organizing. Chris Nevitt of FRESC suggests that in another city, Jobs with Justice might be the natural organization to fulfill some of the tasks that FRESC eventually took on, but at the time, Jobs with Justice was in a "bit of a funk" that kept

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<sup>39</sup> It is not clear if the parties are hearing one another or if they are fully communicating their issues and concerns.

them from doing more work.<sup>40</sup> Today, Nevitt states that relations between FRESC, DALF and Jobs with Justice are strong. However, other observers note that in a climate of tight resources, there may often be a tense boundary between organizations that share similar work and share some potential funding sources.

Beyond the relationship with Jobs with Justice, DALF has also had strong ties with a handful of other community partners, particularly through the work of FRESC on the Campaign for Responsible Development. The groups most active on the CRD include ACORN, 9 to 5 and the Save Our Section 8 (SOS8) -- a housing advocacy group. DALF worked with these groups in its Living Wage campaign in 1999 and 2000. ACORN organizer Brett Erikson commented on the effectiveness of the CRD, and the role that FRESC has played: “FRESC is a wonderful organization. They have really been good. The coalition meetings are pretty diverse – everyone from Jobs with Justice to the trades. They have done leadership trainings on campaigns. Labor and ACORN have sometimes come at things from different ways, so the coalition has really been great at making that work.”

Linda Meric of 9 to 5 notes that in some ways, the weaknesses of the Denver area are also its strengths: because there is not a large progressive community, and because union density is not high, labor and community have more incentive to work together than they might in other cities. Meric sees a natural connection between the agenda of the CRD and the work of 9 to 5. In part, this is aided by the fact that Meric herself comes from a labor background – she had been an SEIU organizer and worked on the Justice for Janitors campaign in the 1990s.

A more recent community partner for the DALF is the immigrant rights group, Rights for All People (RAP). RAP leader Lisa Duran worked closely with several labor leaders in the

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<sup>40</sup> At the same time, others disagree that JwJ was in a funk and suggest that FRESC was unwilling to work with JwJ for various reasons. We were not able to interview former JwJ staffperson Felicia Hilton for this article.

Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride work. Duran comments that while labor community coalitions are always delicate and difficult, in Denver, they have been “not so much problematic as non-existent.” However, Duran sees the IWFR as a positive step: “It was a great experience. We worked together very well, and were even told by some of the bus riders at the follow-up meeting in LA that our stop was the best in the country.” The common work on the Freedom Ride has already started a new project in motion: Duran and Moody will attempt to raise funds to launch a Worker Organizing Project, focused on making sure that immigrant workers are paid for their work.

Compared to other cities that are working to develop labor-community partners, it appears that Denver has less involvement from faith-based organizations than some other cities. Although some clergy members participate in local labor events, it does not appear that there is an active labor-oriented faith group in the Denver area at this time. Starting and building such a labor-religious network requires resources at a time when DALF has already stretched its energy.

### *Preparing for Governance*

It seems clear that DALF has had success in electing people to office. But to what extent has the organization and its allies been able to develop a broad vision of regional power? Do the specific policy campaigns of DALF and FRESA tie into a larger vision of labor-led governance? And has DALF developed the infrastructure to hold the labor-backed candidates accountable to the DALF platform, turn out activists for events and rallies, and elect more labor candidates next time around?

Many observers agree that DALF has been very successful in turning around the labor movement's electoral mobilization. DALF developed an innovative approach for candidate

endorsement, requiring candidates to attend DALF information sessions in order to get endorsed. In addition, DALF was quite effective in mobilizing union activists around election work. According to the DALF Annual Report, in the 2003 election: “over 7,000 Denver unionists received a direct mailing from us; union activists made over 50,000 phone calls to other union members; nearly 5,000 were phone calls made during the November General Election; 120 union activists dropped 20,000 pieces of literature to union households; nearly 700 new union voters were registered; and 215 volunteers spent election day on GOTV.” This suggests that DALF has learned the mechanics of mobilizing voters and performed them well.

DALF states that in elections, they were able to increase voter registration from a 50% average to 80% in their targeted districts, and increase union voter turnout from 20-40% to over 80%. DALF has also put work into developing a strategic plan for getting local policy initiatives passed, and attempting to lay the groundwork for connecting local policy work with organizing victories. DALF sees that in future election cycles, electing a greater majority of labor-backed Council members, along with a labor-backed Mayor, could prove a huge step forward. DALF also hopes to groom member candidates knowing that endorsed candidates are not the same as those who share the values of labor from inside the movement.

At this time, it appears that DALF could put more work into strengthening the accountability and functioning of their allies on the City Council. DALF has no formal mechanism for punishing Councilors who do not support their agenda. One way accountability might be achieved is if the DALF was able to get their candidates to meet regularly and frequently as a caucus, with DALF and FRESC representatives in attendance. This would ensure better communication between the elected officials and DALF/FRESC, better coordination of

work within the Council caucus and between the Councilors and labor, and stronger accountability.

Labor leaders involved in the establishment of FRESC and in the struggle for a CBA at Gates agree that what DALF and FRESC need most now is to win. DALF leadership is elected leadership. It has asked much from its affiliates over the last few years. While DALF has much to show for its efforts, it has spent a lot of financial resources and political capital on the CRD/CBA strategy. If DALF and FRESC can demonstrate the power of the Campaign for Responsible Development through a significant win or two, they may be able to accumulate more power and political capital. This would enable DALF to play a more significant and effective role in its electoral work and in effecting worker and community friendly public policy in metro-Denver.

### *Shifting the Public Debate*

Labor's community allies in particular agree that DALF and FRESC seem to have had an impact on shifting the public debate around community development. In fact, Brett Erikson of ACORN states that the Campaign for Responsible Development has already seen success: "I would say that we have already won. A few years ago, no one was talking about stuff like CBAs, responsible development. Now, that has really moved to the forefront. We've been above the fold a few times in the *Denver Post*." Heidi Zwicker-Barrett of Jobs with Justice agrees: "I do think CRD has had an impact on shifting the public debate around this issue – people do seem concerned with responsible development now." Although there has not been a victory on a CBA for the Gates development at this point, while previous economic development projects seemed to get a rubber stamp, that has not been the case with the Gates project to date.



The struggles mounted by DALF and other elements of the labor and community movements over TIFs for the Colorado Convention Center Hotel and at the Gates redevelopment have also been noticed by Denver business concerns. Noting that historically “unions have applied most of their influence to state and federal policy issues”<sup>41</sup> the *Denver Business Journal* stressed that the DALF is leading the way in a “national movement by organized labor to force prevailing wage and family-friendly policies on publicly subsidized construction projects.”<sup>42</sup> In the same article, Bill Miller, vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce remarked on the weakening of labor’s position on the national level and offered the possibility that “Maybe from [labor’s] perspective, there’s more emphasis on where they have control.”<sup>43</sup>

### *Leadership Development*

Several interviewees suggest that leadership development may be one of the DALF’s weak points. After the initial transition of leadership at the DALF, it appeared that Denver had managed to cultivate a core of solid leaders. Leslie Moody was only 32 years old when she took over the DALF reins. She brought fresh new life into a labor movement most often dominated by older men. Other union leaders were instrumental not only in reviving Jobs with Justice, but bringing new energy to the DALF.

However, according to Leslie Moody, the success of DALF and FRESC began to change the nature of the organizations from volunteer to staff-driven. With this change came a drop off in leadership from volunteers. But DALF is working hard to respond to this by offering leadership training programs attended by between 30 and 50 volunteers on a regular basis. DALF is trying to give volunteers skills so they can take on more responsibility. FRESC is

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<sup>41</sup> Erin Johnson, 2003. “Unions Making Their Presence Felt.” *Denver Business Journal*. June 20.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

running a leadership institute to develop the lobbying, research, and community organizing skills of volunteers. According to Moody, “For many years it was just me and the political director here – other work was done by volunteer labor. Then FRESC was started, and more staff came on. Now there is a big emphasis on staff doing everything. We see the need to bring volunteer leadership back in.” Kevin Mulligan of CWA agrees. For him, this aspect is the greatest weakness of the DALF and the general Denver area labor movement: “The movement needs to do a better job of conscious leadership development.”

Another way in which DALF and FRESC have enhance its leadership development training program is with a grant from the Ms. Foundation to focus on developing women leaders. The grant allowed FRESC to hire an organizer to work on this. The program will start with a retreat for women elected leaders and staff. Women will then be partnered with women mentors. So, DALF leadership development involves a broad range of training programs, including components on economic development and subsidies, research, working in coalitions, and organizing. FRESC developed this training based in part on the model developed by Working Partnerships. As of late January 2004 three sessions have been held. It is too early to assess how effective the programs are in developing new leaders.

### *Real Victories*

The DALF, FRESC and allies have won some concrete achievements in the past several years. These can be divided into 2 categories: electoral work and local policy. At the electoral level, many would characterize the efforts of DALF in 2000 and 2003 as a victory. As mentioned above, in 2000 labor was able to elect 7 state senators in non-democratic targets. State AFL-CIO political director Tyler Chafee says that he sees Labor 2000 as the “first victory for DALF.”

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

While the campaign work was a joint effort between the state AFL-CIO and DALF, “it was then that the DALF field campaign really got going,” according to Chafee.

In 2003, DALF took their electoral mobilization skills and converted them into victory at the local level. Some argue that the loss of the mayoral seat was a major blow that outweighs the other outcomes of the race. Others also argue that the City Council victories should not necessarily be attributed to DALF, as it was a few locals and their rank and file members that did the hard work. But others point out that the success in City Council races had at least two significant impacts. First, it put a whole slate of pro-labor candidates into office. With the DALF endorsement process, these candidates have had to listen to and take seriously local labor issues. This support on the Council has, and can, translate into major victories for labor. Second, the City Council victories had a psychological impact. According to Chafee, local politicians “now know that labor cares what the City Council does.” Leslie Moody adds that the 2003 races also indicate a shift from a defensive battle (in 2000 and 2002) to an offensive one.

In terms of local policy, while much of the economic development organizing represents works in progress, the CRD did successfully keep Wal-Mart out of the gates development project. In the end, the developer and the CRD signed a legally binding agreement that big box retail stores will not be allowed even if ownership of the land is transferred to a new party.

### *Organizing*

To date, DALF's work has not translated into immediate large-scale organizing victories. It is perhaps not fair to judge them by this criteria, as very few places around the country have witnessed large-scale organizing success. Such victories arguably involve long-term work to shift the cultural and political environment for organizing. Indeed, according to Bruce Colburn

of the AFL-CIO, DALF leaders realize the difficulties of organizing workers through traditional NLRB elections. Instead, they decided to take the bold risk of changing the prospects for organizing, through building local political power. The hope is that by electing labor-friendly candidates, unions can negotiate CBAs and other legislation that will offer large-scale opportunities for organizing. A labor-friendly municipal government could also assist organizing public sector workers. The next few years will show if this strategy for organizing prevails.

## **Challenges**

As an infant work in progress DALF's power building effort offers an excellent window into the challenges that many labor leaders might face when starting down this path. Our interviewees suggested a number of challenges that DALF has had to face in its efforts to build power in Denver. These include the following issues (not necessarily listed in order of importance).

## *Resources*

Most labor councils are struggling for resources in general, but those who preside over areas facing heavy job loss have a particularly hard time. Denver has seen a rapid decline in union density in recent years, resulting in even fewer resources to go around. Some observers noted that work in Denver is particularly difficult, as no one – foundations, international unions, or the national AFL-CIO - sees the state as a priority. This means DALF has to work hard for any support it gets. Adding to these difficulties, Jobs with Justice looks to the same funding sources as DALF. This may heighten what some observers and participants see as a troubled relationship between what all agree should be natural allies.

### *What is the role of a CLC?*

The DALF leadership is continually pulled in different directions. For some, a labor council should provide leadership for the local labor movement, pushing it to try new things and take the movement forward. Others warn that a labor council cannot get too far ahead of its members – that it is the affiliates, in fact, that need to determine which way forward for the movement. Tyler Chaffee of the State AFL-CIO remarked:

There is always tension from the affiliates. The tension is whether to jump out and do stuff and wait for the Locals to catch up, and sit back and wait for the Locals to get stuff going. You can't just say, 'We have to do this.' For example, if you just go out and win neutrality, there has to be a Local there ready to follow up on it, take advantage of it. It is wasted work otherwise. We're always asking that – how do we walk that line? How to not get too far ahead in front that the affiliates can't catch up?

This tension was evident in some of the interviews we conducted. One critic commented that it isn't that the DALF is ahead of the affiliates, but that “All they [DALF] do is take our money and our staff and take the credit.”

### *Leadership Styles and Organizing Approaches*

Beyond the constant tension over roles, it appears that there are also different visions on organizing tactics between DALF and some affiliates. This particular type of tension can be found in other cities, particularly in labor/community coalitions. Specifically, the tension arises when community groups approach organizing in a confrontational manner. They select targets (whether an employer or politician), and engage in escalating tactics that apply pressure on the target in order to achieve their goal. In contrast, many union leaders are used to working in a non-confrontational approach. They may attempt to pass legislation by having lunch with city

leaders, just as they may bargain contracts through relatively calm negotiations. While this is a caricature that doesn't always hold (some unions engage in confrontational tactics, and some community groups avoid confrontation), it is a common outcome in a number of settings.

In Denver, it appears that the DALF and FRESC tend to have a more confrontational style than some of the leaders of affiliates. This makes sense, given the background of the DALF and FRESC leadership. But it can lead to a different approach than affiliates might choose. According to Neal Hall, "From the Building Trades perspective, it's a business relationship with the contractor or the developer. From the CLC side: They say we need to demand things and lay down in the street until we get it."

This difference may be more than just a different choice of tactics. For years, there has been internal debate among labor activists about the political goals of the labor movement. Some believe it is possible to work within current economic relationships, and that unions are better off when cooperating with bosses to make that system work as well as possible. Others argue that in order for unions to make significant improvements for their members, major structural economic and political change is necessary. This larger structural change will only come about through confrontational politics. It is not clear if some of the differences in strategy between DALF and affiliates stem from this particular point: a different vision for the future of the labor movement.

### *Conservative state politics*

As noted above, in recent history the Republicans have dominated the state legislature in Colorado reflecting the conservative and rural interests of most areas outside the Denver metro area. Republican moderates, labor friendly "swing votes" in the legislature, and Democratic control of the Governor's office up until 1998 enabled labor to fend off the rightwing push for

“right-to-work” and other legislation hostile to worker interests. With term limits eroding the number of moderate Republicans in the legislature and a Republican snug in the Governor’s mansion, labor in Colorado is faced with particularly difficult legislative and electoral terrain in the coming years.

Additionally, while there is a substantial Democratic Party voting block in Denver, the party in Denver is conservative in nature and is connected to corporate interests. “That is a challenge,” according to Mitch Ackerman, “because [through DALF] we are trying to change the corporate culture.”<sup>44</sup> Because the DALF strategy is to challenge the corporate dominated policy regime, this very strategy may increasingly put DALF and labor in the open field beyond the shelter of the Democratic Party, its traditional redoubt in Denver politics. In this light, DALF seems to be making a robust effort to hold the city council accountable by attending weekly city council meetings and mobilizing the CRD to pressure the council on key points.

In 2003 all of the Denver mayoral candidates were Democrats. Some observers believe the 2003 mayoral race in Denver brought to light a significant shift to the right among Denver voters and Democratic Party supporters based on the changing demographics of the city. On June 5, 2003 the *Denver Post* reported that experts believed the traditional base of the party with its labor and Hispanic constituencies “can’t deliver victories like they once did in Denver. A longtime Democratic stronghold.”<sup>45</sup> Speaking to this possible class shift in Denver politics in the same article, Leslie Moody is quoted as saying “What we’re seeing is the Jesse Ventura, Michael Bloomberg-ization of Denver.”<sup>46</sup> If the experts alluded to in the *Post* and Moody are

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Mitch Ackerman.

<sup>45</sup> Susan Greene and Jeffrey A. Roberts, 2003. “Whites Solid Behind Hickenlooper, Some See Landslide as Class Shift.” *The Denver Post*, June 5.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

right about such a shift, this could mean formidable days ahead for DALF in local electoral politics.

*“Rogue unions.”*

There are a number of unions within DALF’s jurisdiction and on the Colorado labor scene willing to chart an independent course. The Carpenters have been willing to pursue their own agenda at times, such as with their campaign to negotiate card check neutrality at the Colorado Convention Center Hotel. The Building Trades also used tactics that do not have the support of the broader labor coalition. In the not too distant past the leadership of the UFCW has threatened to sever its DALF and State Federation affiliations and is prepared to oppose Leslie Moody’s candidacy for another term as DALF president. UFCW bought its own phone banking equipment after the 2002 state senate elections and the leadership there is highly critical of DALF’s ability to organize effective voter district door-to-door and phone banking campaigns.<sup>47</sup> And while some Teamsters locals contribute financially to DALF’s electoral efforts, according to interviewees, the Teamsters feel capable of running their own programs and therefore remain outside of DALF. According to interviewees, politicians and the business community are aware of the tensions and interest conflicts existing in and between the unions and their coalitions in Denver, and exploit these to no end.

*Building Trust*

Another apparent challenge to the DALF, FRESC, and the CRD seems to be made evident by the lack of shared understanding we found around the status of the Gates Rubber redevelopment project and the likely success of the CRD in winning a CBA. At the inception of



this research project those working at DALF or FRESC describe the project as stalled. Now they see it as having taken on an environmental justice angle while the developer gets his plans and clean-up efforts approved by the city. DALF and FRESC see Gates as offering more than a 50-50 chance of success. Others in the coalition say Gates is on track but the coalition has not figured out how to leverage a deal for the CBA with the developer. Still others see the CBA on Gates as a losing gambit. This level of dissonance on both the status of the Gates project and on the CRD's chance for success may be evidence of a failure of communication between CRD members, lack of trust between coalition members, and lack of a shared vision for what it will take to win.

On the other hand, the coalition is a work in progress with constantly changing dynamics. It is an effort to bring together people and organizations that have not worked together before, and that do not always have a common language for explaining their work. It is difficult to assess which of the concerns raised are real potential threats to the CRD, which are simply expressions of different perspective, and which arise due to personality differences.

Even with the differences noted above, DALF and the Building Trades, including the Carpenters, are working together. They are collaborating on a Responsible Contractor Ordinance that may have grown out of their conflicts over the Convention Center Hotel. All are members of the Campaign for Responsible Development. These efforts may enhance the level of trust between these groups. The coalition work has the potential to deepen the shared sense of understanding and solidarity between these groups.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Ernie Duran.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the DALF faces many challenges. Not the least is an extremely hostile state political climate. Unions already face a difficult road to organize any workplace given that they must win two elections and get a super-majority in order to have a union shop. On top of this, state legislators are continually trying to pass a statewide Right-to- Work bill. Union density currently stands at about eight or nine percent of the workforce and is falling. Clearly, the conditions are not favorable for building the labor movement.

In this context, a group of labor leaders have pushed forth with an experiment to rebuild labor's political power in Denver. The approach involves several prongs. First, DALF is leading the way in changing the way labor relates to municipal politics. Rather than giving out quick endorsements and big checks to politicians, DALF now requires candidates to undergo a more rigorous process in order to get an endorsement. The endorsement now also means more, as it comes with a sophisticated voter mobilization strategy. On top of this, DALF and FRESC are making their presence known in the city. They attend city council meetings, lobby representatives, and make sure elected representatives know they are being watched.

The second prong of the strategy is the creation of a non-profit wing of the labor council. FRESC was set up to do research and policy work that is meant to provide a bigger-picture framework for the work of the labor movement. It is not enough to try to organize existing jobs in Denver: labor must go on the offensive and get involved in determining what kinds of jobs are created. FRESC's role is to argue for more responsible public investment – that city dollars go into economic development that creates living wage, unionized jobs. To this end, FRESC has established the Campaign for Responsible Development. This effort is building a labor-community coalition that can intervene in local economic development. CRD has been involved

in work to stop the building of Wal-Mart's in the Denver area, and is currently attempting to negotiate a Community Benefits Agreement for the multi-million dollar Gates/Cherokee Redevelopment project.

The DALF and FRESC are not without their critics. Some critique the particular personalities running these projects. Others argue that the political choices the groups have made have alienated affiliates and potential community allies. Still others assert that DALF and FRESC are ignoring the work they should be doing (such as servicing their members), and attempting to take on work that should be left to other organizations.

As with the other cases, the eventual strengths and limitations of the work of the DALF, FRESC and the CRD will play out over time. They have had some initial successes, but also have a long path to travel in sparking labor and progressive movement resurgence in Colorado. Great challenges, however, require big risks which leaders in Denver have been willing to take. Their bold initiatives offer a ray of optimism for the labor movement.